

Sermon

Sunday 2nd August, 2009

Lessons

Exodus 16: 1 – 16

St John 6: 22 – 35

Jesus said, ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.’

St John 6: 35

Almost twenty years ago, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, referred to a church he had seen in Papua New Guinea that had no doors and no walls. People were able to go in, stay on the edges, listen for as long or as short a time as they liked, and then move away. The image became the metaphor: the Church without walls. Carey said, ‘I want an open church which is not afraid to be in the world.’ He went on:

My one abiding fear.....is that the Church should settle for easy answers which will satisfy only those already convinced that Christ is the truth and that it may encourage the forces in our Church which actually wish to erect fences of doctrine and discipline leading to a sectarian fellowship of believers. I resist that because I believe with all my heart that the Church of Jesus Christ should be a Church of blurred edges, a Church of no walls, where people can ask their hardest questions without condemnation, and share their deepest fears without reproach.

The Archbishop said,

Too often we hear moralistic or experiential sermons which have epistemological basis [– they are not based on knowledge]. I raise the question: will the gospel ever be public truth if our preachers are not grappling with the challenges of scientism (sic) from their pulpits, or drawing on literature, art, science and theology to show that the Christian world view is relevant today?

The original meaning of the term ‘Church without walls’ was a call to clergy, through preaching, to engage with the world and thereby illustrate the relevance of the gospel. Dr Carey was spot on! The clergy and, in turn, the people need to take on board the best thinking which science can provide and engage with literature, art and the very best theology. If we do not take on-board the insights of the age, then we become a sect: we would become narrow and out of touch with real life.

I read with some amusement, if not despair, the front page of *The Press and Journal* on Monday 20th July. The headline read: ‘Protesters fail to stop first ferry on Sabbath’. Let me read to you a couple of paragraphs:

The vessel Isle of Lewis was full, with 391 passengers and 84 cars and commercial vehicles, as she made the historic run from Stornoway.

A group of about 25 protesters....stood in silent condemnation as passengers, many of them revellers from the weekend Hebridean Celtic music festival, filed on board. One man held a placard bearing the words, ‘Remember the Sabbath Day to Keep it Holy.’ As the boat backed away from Stornoway ferry terminal into the bay, a large group of Sunday-sailing supporters burst into applause and the protesters responded with a psalm.

One protester said: ‘We are not able to stop it. The Lord is able to stop it. The Lord Jesus is supreme and sovereign with dominion over all of us.’

‘We are here to testify thatthis ferry serviceis displeasing to the living and true God.’

I do not mock the sincerity of the protesters. I respect and applaud the passion with which they seek to live out their faith in Jesus Christ. I do not deny them their right to be Sabbatharians; they can continue to be Sabbatharians. What amused me the most or, more truthfully, caused me the greatest despair was the theology: ‘We are not able to stop it. The Lord is able to stop it. This ferry service is displeasing to the living and true God.’ Front page news: ‘The Lord is able to stop it!’ Well, He didn’t and, call it a wild guess, but He’s not going to! When is our theology going to mature beyond believing that God crudely intervenes in human history, as if God would intervene to stop a ferry running but not the Holocaust. All theology needs to be written post-Holocaust with the absence of God and the non-intervention of God foremost in our minds.

I say that all theology needs to be written post-Holocaust and that all theology needs to take full account of the absence of the Holy One and the non-intervention of the Intelligent Mind, but that makes such theology sound very recent and modern. In fact, the oldest book in the Bible, the book which was written before any of the others, is the book which majors on the absence of God, the incomprehensibility of God and the non-intervention of God. It is the Book of Job. Job is a man, a good man, a man of faith, wealth and intellect, whose life and soul are torn apart by the murder of his children, the loss of his wealth and, finally, the loss of his health. He complains to God; he wants to die. The darkness in the Book of Job is dark indeed. God does not intervene

and Job feels himself to be a toy to amuse God: God is completely absent to Job's consciousness. At the end of the book, God addresses Job. God offers no sympathy, apology or explanation. On the contrary, God asks, 'Who are you to question my wisdom with your ignorant, empty words?' Or, from the New King James Version, 'Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?' 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?' 'Have you walked on the floor of the ocean?' 'Who is the mother of the ice and the frost, which turn the waters to stone and freeze the face of the sea?' The Book of Job is theology, theology at its very best, theology we urgently need to re-discover, the theology of the absence of God and the non-intervention of God. It is when God responds to Job's complaint that Job realises that God has journeyed and suffered with him, silently and imperceptibly.

The myth or faith narrative of Job affirms that, despite the darkness, despair and suffering of humanity, God journeys with us and ultimately redeems, restores and never abandons us. The Church in the 21st century desperately needs to rediscover the mature theology of the oldest book in the Bible! In speaking of a Church without walls, Dr Carey was suggesting, among other things, that the Church could learn from science. Although scientific thinking is not static, it is a gift to theology and should encourage us to understand the nature of the

universe and, by implication, the nature of God. And so we turn to the story of the children of Israel in the desert, the story of the manna and the quails.

The Israelites journeyed through the wilderness. They travelled through the Desert of Sin. The name 'Sin' has no connection with the concept of sin or transgression of God's law. They travelled through the Desert of Sin, the wilderness and they did not have enough food to sustain them. They complained to Moses and Aaron:

Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt,
when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full!
For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole
assembly with hunger.

We are told that 'the glory of the LORD appeared in a cloud' and the LORD heard the complaints of the people. Manna or bread appeared in the morning and quails appeared in the camp at night. Myth or faith narrative blends together historical events, liturgy and theology. I have no doubt about the historicity of the journey through the wilderness, the desert, and the 'escape' from Egypt but this is written as faith narrative, written after the theology of the Book of Job. Scholars tell us that the manna is no more than the sweet, sugary sap of a type of tamarisk tree, which if not lifted off the ground early in the morning is eaten by ants. The quails migrate across the Hisma Desert, the Desert of Sin. Writing in the first century AD, the Roman author Pliny describes quails flying to Italy from Arabia in large numbers. He tells of the

birds being so exhausted by their long flight that they were known to land on ships in their hundreds. The wilderness was not a barren desert: it was a place of trees and a place where exhausted quails could have landed for food.

I have no doubt that there are historical events which lie behind the myth or faith narrative of the manna and the quails. The wilderness sojourn became the dominant metaphor for the Israelites. The theological point of this story is not some magic miracle, a conjuring trick with bread and birds, but the fragility and vulnerability of human life and humanity's utter dependence upon the sustenance provided by Yahweh, by God. In this wilderness which brings to the community darkness, despair and suffering God remains illusive, hidden, behind the cloud. Like Job, the Israelites complain about their suffering and, as in Job, they are able to look back upon their suffering in the belief and understanding that God journeyed with them.

The theologian Robert Walker says:

The ultimate purpose of the bible and of dogmatics is knowledge of Christ. Unless we know Christ in his reality, neither the bible nor dogmatics make sense....We know Christ in the bible and theology but also through them, which means that we have to pass beyond them to the reality of Christ is we are to know him. We need to pass through them in such a way that our thought is not just resting in the statements of scripture and dogmatics but resting on Christ and knowing him in his own person and reality.

In other words, God is known in the soul, in the consciousness, in the place beyond the reach of words and our best theologies. At its best, science instructs us about the nature of the universe and gives us some insight into the nature of God. The absent, non-interventionist God, the God of the Bible, is a theology which should encourage us to read Scripture with fresh eyes, appreciating perhaps for the first time the poetry, symbolism, mythology, theology and liturgy which is true but not factual.

Let me close with a story told by Leslie Griffiths, a minister in the Methodist Church. He was working in Haiti. Griffiths writes:

[This is the story of] a woman whose name I cannot even remember. She was in church one Sunday morning when I arrived to lead the service.....At one point in the service, [she] came forward (as arranged) to give her testimony. She told the congregation that, in the course of the week, she'd had to bury one of her children, an 18-month-old baby boy. I stopped her in order to ask how many women in church that morning had [had a similar] experience. Hands went up until I became aware that every woman of childbearing age had known the grief felt by this poor woman in front of us. She completed her story and then began to sing.

She'd chosen an old hymn that a missionary in former years must have translated from English....We no longer sing it these days, it's considered a little out of fashion and inferior. That day, however, as this poor peasant woman sang its words, it broke my heart and yet lifted my spirit at the same time. She broke down in tears in the chorus and we all joined in to help her finish it. This is what she sang:

In loving kindness Jesus came
My soul in mercy to reclaim:
And from the depths of sin and shame,
Through grave, he lifted me.

*From sinking sands – he lifted me;
with tender hand – he lifted me;
from shades of night to plains of light,
O praise his name – he lifted me.*

Griffiths says, ‘It is the faith of that woman that keeps hope alive in my breast.’

For that woman, for you and for me, Jesus is the Bread of Life, the sustenance in our fragility and vulnerability. He is the image of the Father. God is known deep in our consciousness and we are too often let down by bad, bad theology. We need to let science, art and literature instruct us; we need to re-discover a theology of absence and we need to see the Bible for what it is, a sacred God-inspired book of poetry, mythology, liturgy and truth, not fact but truth. You and I know that Jesus is the Bread of Life: it is bad theology which gets in the way.

Amen.